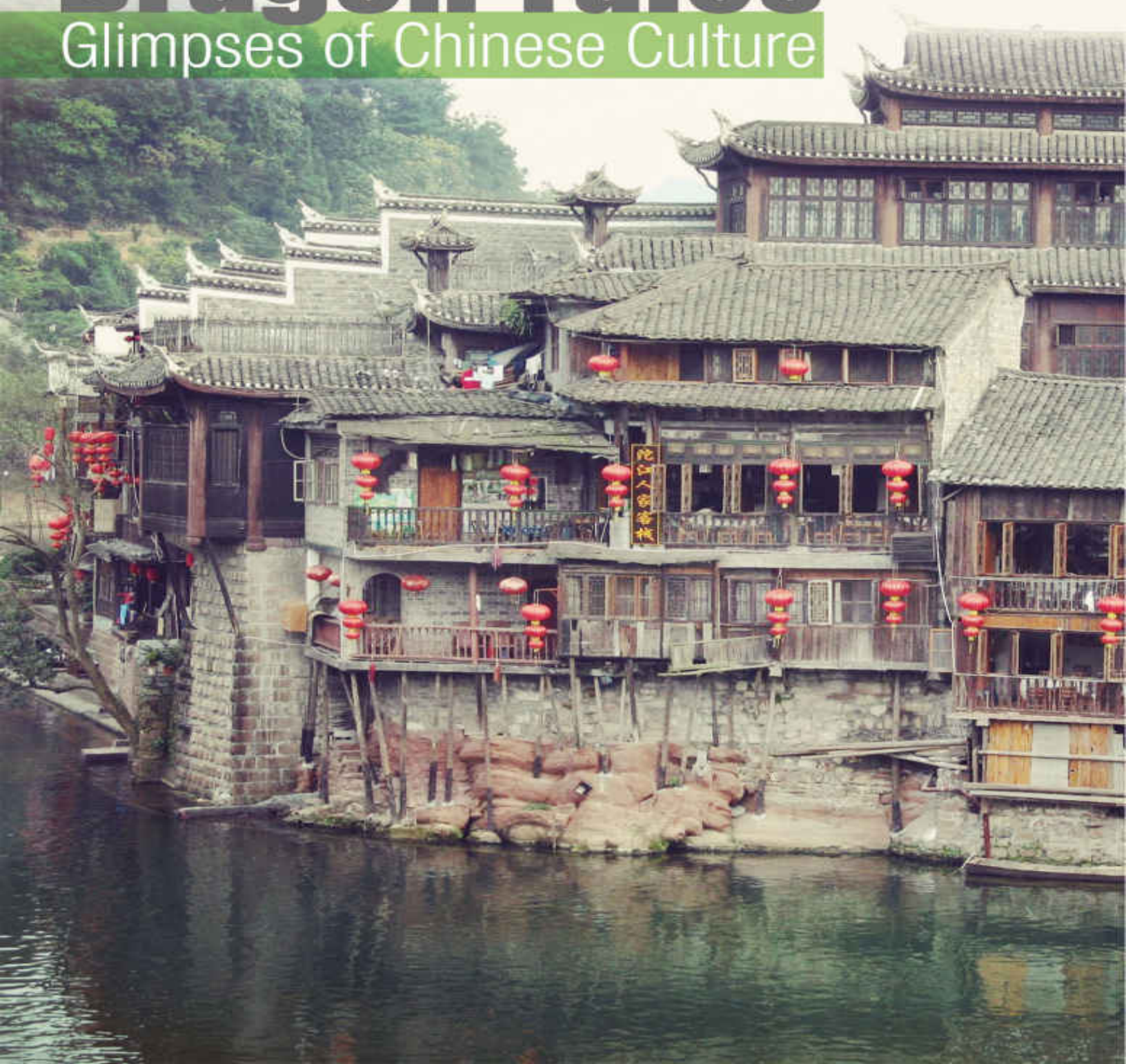


URBANATOMY® ELECTRONIC

Dragon Tales

Glimpses of Chinese Culture



Dragon Tales

Glimpses of Chinese Culture

Short essays, 2007-8

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CEO: Leo Zhou

Text: Nick Land

Cover design: Ivy Zhang

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Introduction

These short essays were written for *That's Shanghai* magazine during the years 2007-8, as a monthly *Dragon Tales* column. They were produced following a request by the Chinese government media agency, partnered with the magazine, for it to demonstrate – at least – some token interest in the local cultural environment. They were written with this brief in mind.

Despite the superficiality of these engagements with Chinese traditional culture, it is my hope that they derive enough from their object to merit extraction from their original context, and reproduction in this format. Each marks a moment of preliminary contact with something vast and unfamiliar, and is best conceived as an orientation guide for further, sustained attention.

Nick Land (April, 2014)

Counter Cultures

Chinese mathematics is reborn in silicon

Visitors to Shanghai's Xujiahui may wonder about this 'Xu' whose home is commemorated so spectacularly, and those who delve further into the matter will discover plenty to stimulate their interest. Xu Guangqi (1562-1633) was a scholar of enormous consequence, incarnating recognizable Shanghai characteristics that raise eyebrows throughout the country even today. In particular, Xu raises questions about the specificities of the Chinese mathematical tradition that are finally generating long-overdue discussion.

Xu was a Ming Dynasty official, crucially responsible for introducing Western astronomy to China. More generally, he was a cosmopolitan modernizer, anticipating attitudes that would come to be widely associated with both Shanghai denizens and with mathematically competent professionals worldwide. Although well-trained in China's indigenous mathematical tradition, under the influence of Jesuit missionary and scholar Matteo Ricci he became a keen – perhaps even zealous – convert to the form of axiomatic, geometrically-oriented mathematics Europe had inherited from the Greeks, vigorously promoting Euclid's *Elements* among initially suspicious Confucian scholars (who were typically wary of the vexatious disputations they associated with logic-chopping Buddhist intellectuals).

Where Chinese mathematics differed from that of the West, Xu judged it simply inferior. His most notorious comment on the subject states this uncompromisingly: "Rules in the East that are the same as those in the West are all right, those different from those in the West are all wrong."

But how and when does China's traditional mathematics "differ from" Xu's Euclidean ideal? The topic is obviously an elaborate one, but

not chaotically so. Despite its history of at least 3,000 years, a remarkable consistency of approach is evident throughout the Chinese mathematical legacy, from the oldest extant text, the Suan shu shu (written around 180 BC but only discovered in 1984) up to Xu's own time and beyond. When described and interpreted negatively, by Xu Guangqi among others, the distinctive characteristics of the Chinese approach are a deficiency of axiomatic principle, an aversion to demonstration or logical development and a failure to rise above computational practicalities -- yet there is nothing inevitable about such a negative formulation.

When Wu Wenjun (Wu Wentsun, 1919-), another Shanghainese mathematician of extraordinary capability and achievement, examined the same ancient Chinese sources that Xu had so dismissively evaluated, he came to a very different estimation of their value. Wu recognized a positive consistency in the traditional Chinese approach, one that emphasized rigorous problem-solving, not due to a deficiency of axiomatic principle, but rather out of an alternative attachment – to computational technique. Intellectually maturing in the age of intelligent machines, Wu recognized an 'algorithmic' principle in the Chinese tradition, pre-adapted to the mechanization of computation, with demonstration being supported by performance rather than by argumentation.

"I was initially struck by the power of the computer," Wu wrote. "I was also devoted to the study of Chinese ancient mathematics and began to understand what [it] really was." Fittingly, he spent less time making his case than exhibiting it in productive mathematical work. The path-breaking contribution he made to the mechanization of geometry during the 1970s was nothing less than revolutionary, opening new horizons in both mathematics and computer science, and demonstrating with incontestable practicality that some of the modern world's most radical potentialities can be found in the oldest of places.

Bold Strokes

Calligraphic brushes with martial glory

When Zhang Yimou's ravishing mytho-historical blockbuster *Hero* arrived on Western movie screens, its audiences were fascinated by the connections it made between calligraphy and swordsmanship. Long taught that "the pen is mightier than the sword" (a proverb that can be traced back to the Greek origins of European civilization), Westerners were at least partially prepared for the words of Zhang's King of Qin (Chen Daoming), who responds to the calligraphy of Broken Sword (Tony Leung) by saying: "The ultimate goal of swordsmanship is to have no sword in either one's hand or heart and to be at peace with the entire world."

But it would be a mistake to imagine things end there, in an association between writing and martial prowess conceived as tidily oppositional and metaphorical. Zhang strikes deeper into the heart of the connection, the place where the supreme skills of brush and sword arise from a common "return to innocence." In one magnificent scene, as a sky-darkening hail of arrows from the King of Qin's army falls upon the calligraphy school where Broken Sword is completing his scroll -- whose content consists of the single character "Sword" -- Nameless (Jet Li) deflects the arrows with his blade, while congratulating Broken Sword on his work. "Beautiful calligraphy," says Nameless. "Beautiful swordplay," Broken Sword replies. "Without your sword, the scroll would not exist."

That culture may need to be protected by the instruments of barbarism is a paradox familiar to any civilization with tragic sense. Yet there is also a more specifically Chinese understanding of this conjunction: Without the root of swordplay there would be no calligraphy, because this is an art consisting of motion made legible, drawing upon a particular placement of the body in culture and a particular understanding of cultivation, of finesse. It is no coincidence

that Zhang finds it so captivating, since it is not only profoundly Chinese – enmeshed with the body-positive culture of martial arts, qigong and traditional medicine -- but also closer to the workings of a movie than a text. Western art approaches it more closely in the ‘action painting’ of Jackson Pollock than in the transcendent valorization of ‘the word’ inherited from the Greeks.

Any piece of calligraphy results from a meticulously executed action, consisting of precisely numbered, sequenced and accomplished strokes that despite the constraints imposed by the character concerned -- and irrespective of such important variables as the concentration of ink, the thickness and absorbency of the paper and the flexibility of the brush -- are able to express complete originality (or cultivated innocence). This ability to distill and re-animate an entire culture through the refined spontaneity of calligraphy is exemplified by the work of the Shanghai-born master Tung Qichang (Tung Chi Chang, 1555-1636), who learnt from the ‘Mad Chan’ school of Chinese Buddhism that cutting can be preserving. Boldly striking free from the restraints of a tradition can be the surest path back to its source.

Half Past Fate

Lu Xun's spiral into time

By the end of the 19th century, China's prolonged national humiliation – typically dated back to defeat in the first Opium War (1839-42) -- had triggered furious controversy. Frustration at the inability of the country to command international respect drove Chinese intellectuals to search with growing urgency for the fundamental causes of the country's relative decline as a global power. What went wrong?

The 'modernization debate' continues to this day, and a minor theme within or alongside it concerns science fiction. It is not unnatural to assume that the popularity of this cultural form, dedicated to the assimilation of technological possibilities, closely tracks social commitment to scientific progress and dynamic modernization. Chinese policy makers have frequently made exactly this association, promoting science fiction as a pedagogical tool, while interpreting its relative neglect in the country as a symptom of wider cultural obstacles to development. Might an investigation into the reception of science fiction in China guide a productive, critical interrogation of national traditions?

Among the first to think along these lines was China's most celebrated modern writer, Lu Xun (1881-1936), who not only wrote the first story in vernacular Chinese ("A Madman's Diary", 1918) but also introduced science fiction to the Chinese audience through his translation of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*. A writer and thinker of daunting dialectical mobility, Lu was drawn into what became a life-long obsession with China's modernization problem by the May 4th Movement. His diagnosis of China's social inertia was multifaceted and in certain respects extremely radical. He recommended the wholesale replacement of the Chinese characters

by a Romanized phonetic alphabet, for instance, while peppering his stories with fierce satirical criticism of Confucian ideals and attitudes.

In retrospect, however, the implications of his work are far more conciliatory. Like today's Chinese proponents of science fiction, he questioned the disproportionate prestige awarded to humanistic education and culture by the literate elite, advocating a greater emphasis upon scientific and technological learning, and like other progressive thinkers of his age he struggled against imprisonment within the fatalistic, backward looking culture of a society seemingly burdened and exhausted by its own vast history, a culture too easily tempted by cyclical models of time, perhaps cast adrift into dreamlike mythic consciousness by a lack of grammatical tenses, and too meekly accepting of the Confucian maxim: "Study the past if you would divine the future."

Lu Xun sought a way forward for China, an escape from cyclic repetition and mental closure, with science fiction playing its part in this. But the science fiction he anticipated passed beyond 19th century progressivism, with its straight line of time tracing a vapour-trail into the future. What Lu explored was something more modern and involving, a looping, tangled spiral of time, departing from mythic cyclicity without simply rejecting it. His *Old Tales Retold* (Gu Shi Xin Bian), published in 1935, demonstrate that re-visiting the past need not mean repeating it. These writings – composed intermittently over a 13 year period – amount to something more than a time-travel fantasy. They are time-travel itself.

The Horror, the Horror

Double trouble with the ghosts this year

The traditional Chinese lunar calendar intercalates an additional month every three years in order to re-adjust itself to the solar cycle. 2007 is one such lunar leap year and for the first time since 1968 it will be the seventh month that gets doubled, so a second helping of hungry ghosts is on the way.

Even In a normal year, seeing double is recommended for appreciating the Hungry Ghost, Zhongyuan or Menglan Festival (among other names), which occurs on the 15th day of the seventh ('Ghost') month. The festival always coincides with a full-moon between the Summer Solstice and Autumn Equinox, associating it with a tilt into darkening and decay. The ghosts are inhabitants of the Yin World, the land of shadows or shades (a word that contains, by spooky coincidence, the name of the remarkably similar Greek pagan shadow realm of Hades). As might be expected of shadow, the Yin World doubles the conventions of its illuminated twin in almost every respect, from political structure down to consumer preferences – as attested by the abundance of combustible paper objects specifically marketed for its denizens, ranging from cars and mobile phones to luxury villas.

The festival is also a cultural doubling, resulting from the overlapping of 'Taoist' (or more accurately indigenous Chinese) and Buddhist elements. In fact, for students of Buddhist sinification, this festival makes an excellent point of departure. When the first Buddhist orders sought to reproduce their monastic orders (Sangha) in China, they confronted a daunting economic problem, since the long-established filial system in the country seemed to have no place for the mediation of religious functionaries in its rituals of ancestral devotion. For this reason the basic father-son generational link

forged by both aboriginal and Confucian custom was over-laid by a novel mother-son bond, exemplified by the story of Mu-lien, who sees his mother among the hungry ghosts and undertakes a shamanic journey to the underworld to redeem her.

This tale, relayed through the Ghost Festival Sutra (Yu lan pen jing) and Pure Land Ghost Festival Sutra (Jing tu yu lan pen jing), places the Buddhist orders in the economically promising position of hostage negotiators, exploiting their expertise to work the difficult relationship between the son and his mother's demonic captors: Feed the ghosts, or your mom gets it. If the Yin World is appeased to the satisfaction of the monks, the mother can be released into the comparatively benign fate of Mu-lien's: rebirth as a pet dog in a wealthy household.

Since the Liang Dynasty (AD 502-557) this Buddhist-Taoist fusion and mutation of traditional ancestral rites has been celebrated in China, gradually consolidating into today's Zhongyuan. The ghost month is a time to burn paper offerings, provide snacks for the hungry ghosts, avoid swimming (dangerous because of its watery Yin associations), release little candle-boats onto convenient ponds and -- of course -- to seek intercession from the Buddha's terrestrial representatives on behalf of those held for ransom below.

King Kongzi

A giant is back on China's cultural skyline

When historians look back upon the early years of the third millennium, one cultural trend that will assuredly be numbered among those principally characterizing the age is the restoration of Confucius (Kongzi) on the Chinese mainland, following more than a century of relative eclipse.

The reputation of this writer, scholar, thinker, educator and advisor has risen, fallen and re-risen in synchrony with Chinese cultural confidence. Widely denounced as a reactionary obstacle to national regeneration during the bitter years of Qing stagnation, his star has re-ascended in harmony with the country's revived fortunes. This year's birthday celebrations in his hometown of Qufu, in Shandong Province, on September 28, promise exceptional – perhaps unprecedented -- festivities.

The very epitomy of the sage, the uniqueness of Confucius is reflected in the great variety of cross-cultural analogies he provokes. A philosopher akin to Socrates, teaching rational and secular ethics, through a restrained and dialectical method that draws out the implicit wisdom from his pupils? A Moses, who establishes the nation's essential cultural canon of venerated books? A Burke who defines the conservative impulse of respect for long established institutions and native traditions, advising cautious, prudential change? Perhaps even a Machiavelli, guiding the prince in the ways of effective governance? All these and more, or something else entirely?

We know beyond reasonable doubt that Confucius revered education, although never at the expense of critical reflection, that he formulated the Golden Rule ("Do not treat others as you would not be treated yourself") as part of a more general advocacy of compassion (ren), that he emphasized self-discipline over surrender

to natural impulse and that he denounced bloodshed as a stain upon the honor of any prince. We can also infer that he delighted in paradox: attributing his wisdom to the ancients whilst instigating a revolution in Chinese consciousness without obvious parallel; accepting both the inevitability and insufficiency of self-interest; defending the principle of authority whilst testing its legitimacy with unanticipated rigor; scrupulously honoring the traditional objects of spiritual devotion whilst profoundly questioning their moral relevance. Given his formidable reputation, it is remarkable how little unambiguous didacticism one finds in Confucius. This is educated reason at work, but also at play -- a provocative yang to Laozi's yin.

Confucius must be counted among the great ironists of Chinese letters, describing a world in which things dignified themselves with labels they no longer conformed to, or merited. He advocated a correction in the relation between words and existing facts (a *zhengming*), to re-animate realities still honored in language but no longer in actuality. So among all the stimulating controversies that renewed attention to this most singular of individuals can be expected to arouse, there is yet one additional aspect to the story that is close to indisputable. By the sclerotic final years of the Qing Dynasty, Confucianism had been hollowed out into a brittle shell, dessicated into sterile formalism – and nobody has ever diagnosed such an eventuality with greater clarity than Confucius himself.

“Study the past if you would divine the future,” the master advised.

Outer Limits

Double ninth threatens too much of an old thing

As its name suggests, the Double Ninth Festival corresponds to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, falling on October 19 this year. Like many Chinese festivals, it is a celebration of time, numbers and their symbolic associations, with ancient tap-roots that reach back equally into folklore and arcane philosophy.

To understand this day's traditional and still most colloquial name, Chongyangjie (literally: the Double Yang Festival), requires a brief excursus into the I Jing or Book of Changes. At its most elementary, the I Jing is a book of number patterns, mixing binary and decimal principles. It is constructed out of 64 hexagrams, each consisting of a unique series of broken (yin, dark, even, feminine) and unbroken (yang, light, odd, masculine) lines. These lines are further classified as young (stable) or old (tilting over into their opposite). An old line expresses a movement to excess, awaiting the correction of time. Which brings us with unbecoming haste to the essential point here: in the I Jing, reflecting the sedimented conclusions of archaic Chinese numerology, nine is the number of old yang, poised at the brink of its transformation into young yin.

The number nine has a prominence and symbolic richness in traditional Chinese culture that far exceeds rapid summary, but one aspect indispensable to the present topic is its association with age. It is an important testament to the antiquity of decimal reckoning in the country (and of long familiarity with the function of zero) that nine is conceived as the highest digit, the limit of simple accumulation. On the basis of this ancient arithmetical philosophy, old yang is doubly aged, as the furthest extremity of the light impulse and as the most senior or fully progressed of the counting signs. The calendric doubling of the number nine accentuates this exorbitance even more precariously. Chongyang is thus a moment of extraordinary and

dangerously exaggerated maturity, which is the key to decoding its meaning and ritual.

Folkloric representations of this hazardous imbalance can be found in a variety of closely related stories, such as the one (from the sixth century) which tells of Huan Jing, apprentice to the magician Fei Changfang, who was warned by his master that disaster would befall his family on the double ninth unless he took protective measures, tying bags of dogwood (zhuyu) to his arms, climbing a mountain and drinking chrysanthemum wine. These protections constitute the ritualistic core of the festival to this day. The special importance of chrysanthemum wine is probably explained by the series of homophonies binding nine (jiǔ) to prolonged duration (jiǔ) and to alcoholic beverages (jiǔ).

Chongyang is a time to reflect upon aging and respect the elderly, to take appropriate herbal precautions and to search out lofty places. In modern times its rituals are rarely marked by a sense of impending hazard, but they still involve a variety of chrysanthemum confections (such as tea and cakes) and chrysanthemum-related events and performances, as well as dogwood sprays and hikes into mountainous areas.

Oh Brother

Whatever happened to the Taiping spirit?

At a time when the world's Christians are especially focused upon their Messiah, it is intriguing to reflect upon his neglected Chinese brother, Hong Xiuquan(洪秀全), – and on the reasons for this neglect.

As most students of Chinese history are aware, Hong was the founder and leader of the Taiping Tianguo (Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace). He created what must surely be one of the most fabulous heresies in the history of Abrahamic monotheism, though there is surprisingly little direct evidence of his cultural influence remaining today, at least in the religious sphere. No new church or sect was left in the wake of the Taiping uprising. In contrast with the ephemeral nature of Hong's legacy, one might look to the amazing endurance of the Mormon Church of Latter Day Saints, founded by Hong's near-contemporary Joseph Smith. Smith discovered his new revelation – engraved on the golden plates of Moroni – in 1827, just ten years before the prophetic dream in which Hong Xiuquan learnt that he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ, despatched by their heavenly father to defeat the Dragon Lord Yan Luo and the demon-devils of the Qing Dynasty. The world population of Mormons exceeds 12.5 million today, but where are the spiritual descendants of the Taipings?

A stronger case could be made for the continuing relevance of Hong Xiuquan's political innovations, but here revolutionary sentiment prevails over social substance. Hong's native Hakka culture deserves much of the credit for the egalitarian dimension of his approach to gender (including the repudiation of footbinding), while his extreme sexual puritanism, requiring the rigorous segregation of the sexes under threat of death, seriously undermined the credibility of his social agenda, even among his contemporaries. His example

of peasant uprising against an Imperial regime seen as no longer blessed with the 'mandate of heaven' must similarly be seen as derivative in its positive content, since it is highly traditional within a Chinese context. In addition, Hong's ambitions to found a new imperial dynasty – starkly apparent during his decade enthroned in Nanjing -- detract significantly from his emancipatory message. Finally, while his collectivist experiments with shared property and radical land reform were clearly attractive to later communist intellectuals and leaders – including Mao Zedong – they serve more as 'pre-scientific' or utopian ideals than as models of practical problem-solving. When Chinese venerate the memory of Hong Xiuquan today, they do so almost exclusively out of respect for Mao.

Ironically enough, it might well be the modernizing, secular and commercial culture of Shanghai that is Hong's greatest legacy. Immediately prior to the Taiping rebellion, the city was a smallish, colonially-sectorized place. In short, there was little to distinguish it. But as refugees from the civil war caused a population explosion, and the city's ethnic boundaries were over-spilled (as Chinese moved into the International Settlement, previously reserved for foreign residents) the country's first commercial culture was brought into being by its first real estate market. It seems historically incontestable that the spirit of modern Shanghai was engendered accidentally amid the chaos of Hong Xiuquan's holy war against the Qings, but then, as the believers say, the Lord works in mysterious ways.

Cold Memories

Qing Ming's secret echo

The Qing Ming (or 'pure brightness') festival, perhaps equally well-known as Tomb-Sweeping Day, falls on April 4 this year. For over a thousand years it has marked the beginning of the fifth among 24 seasonal divisions set by China's traditional lunar calendar, coinciding with the return of spring and new life, a transitional moment appropriate to reflection upon the dead and the past: upon everything that has passed away into darkness to be born ever anew in the progeny, names and memories of the living.

The modern Qing Ming is actually an amalgamation of two festivals that were at one time celebrated separately. The calendrical, seasonal and generational celebration of Qing Ming succeeded – by a day -- another, bleaker and more mysterious commemoration known as Hanshi ('Cold Food'), which has since been enveloped to a point of almost complete imperceptibility, like a chilling subliminal echo.

Hanshi was a festival based on a single ritualistic element, which in turn served to invoke a strange story, from the misty borderland of history and myth. Although the details of this story vary, its essentials are constant and brutally tragic. Chong'er, heir to the throne of the Jin Kingdom during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-475 BC), was driven into exile by a murderous plot, accompanied by his loyal retainer Jie Zitui. Hiding in the mountains, frozen and starving, Jie sliced off part of his own thigh to feed his emaciated master. When Chong'er returned home and ascended to power (as the Duke of Wen), Jie's act of devoted sacrifice was forgotten. When eventually reminded of the events, the duke was stricken by remorse at his own ingratitude. The gyre of tragedy now swept around its final ghastly circuit as -- compacting regret with the arrogance of power – the

Duke commanded Jie to come forth and accept belated appreciation. Instead, Jie retreated into the mountains to live in seclusion with his mother. The Duke then set the mountainside on fire, believing that Jie would be driven by filial piety to bring his mother down to safety. Instead, the charred bodies of mother and son were found together the next day, beneath a blackened willow tree. The appalled Duke directed that in future no fires should be ignited on this day and only cold food eaten.

Given its themes of heat and cold, incandescence, filial piety, commemoration of the dead and the disgrace of ingratitude, it is not entirely surprising that Hanshi should have been assimilated so frictionlessly into the modern Qing Ming. The ritual of today's festival, including the cleaning and upkeep of graves, ceremonial offerings and a family meal shared in spirit with the departed, no longer demands that only cold food be consumed (although the exigencies of graveyard picnics may in any case encourage it). Nevertheless, if those dutifully engaged in the maintenance of ancestral resting places were to be agitated by a momentary, impalpable chill, it might be because a dark and neglected spectre stood as invisible witness to their filial proprieties. As a time of respect for what has passed, Qing Ming has a ceremonial integrity and lucid moral intelligibility, but not all that has passed is well or faithfully remembered. The frosty ghosts of atrocious and enigmatic tales linger still.

Chinese Down-Time

How to think like a water clock

The modern world has conditioned Westerners to associate the passage of time with growth and accumulation, graphically represented by the ascending curves on diagrams describing population increase, economic expansion and the general upward trend of social indicators of every type. There is no more iconic image, in this respect, than the popularization of Darwinian evolution, characterized as a process of literal ascent, showing an ape creature erecting itself in stages to a climactic state of proud human verticality. For this reason, Western cultures do not provide a good preparation for Chinese intuitions about time -- held with remarkable consistency and reinforced by the usage of ordinary language -- which depict the course of time as a descent.

Chinese is a tenseless language, with time orientation marked by specific terms rather than grammatical particles. Among the most common and elementary of these time words are those for 'up' (shang) and 'down' (xia) used to denote the past and future respectively, corresponding to the adjectival usages of 'last' and 'next' in English. While it is quite natural for English speakers to assume a 'flow' of time, Chinese is far more precise in the attribution of a hydraulic quality to such flow, with inexorable downward tendency.

If Western time intuitions are composed from a wide variety of sources, including rising graph lines, astronomical cycles and riverine metaphors, the Chinese sense of time seems to have been more thoroughly disciplined by the workings of a particular time-keeping technology: that of the water clock (clepsydra). Second only to the sundial (gnomon) in antiquity, water clocks have dominated time-keeping throughout millennia of world history. It is only in recent

centuries that their position has been eclipsed, following the emergence of pendulum clocks in Europe during the late Middle Ages. In China, where hydraulic technologies of all kinds have always been strongly emphasized, the appearance of the first water clocks has been dated back as far as 4,000 BC.

Water clocks align the arrow of time with gravitational attraction, while modelling time tangibly as a continuous fluid, not only homogenous, amorphous and (apparently) infinitely divisible, but also elevated in abstraction by its lack of opacity, flavor or odor. Where sundials and mechanical clocks tell the time without exhibiting it, revealing it only through a mark or sign, water clocks appear to substantiate duration itself in their hydraulic mechanism, supporting an apprehension of time that has demonstrated enormous cultural influence and imaginative plausibility.

The Chinese water clock reached a level of sophistication unparalleled in any other society. The most celebrated instance was the Cosmic Engine of Su-Song (AD 1020-1101), described in his horological masterpiece the Xinyi Xiangfayao(新儀象法要). Standing 13 meters tall, this astounding machine included a rotary hydraulic drive, a secondary pressure compensator tank, an escapement mechanism and a drive chain, powering the multiple revolutions of an armillary sphere. Understandably enough, this technological wonder attracted the rapt attention of the great sinologist Joseph Needham.

An intriguing appendix to this story is added by Simon Winchester (a modern student of Needham). In his 1996 book *The River at the Centre of the World: a journey up the Yangtze, and back in Chinese time*, Winchester comes close to envisaging the entire country as an enormous water clock:

“As the river flowed, so had China flowed as well,” he writes. “The riverside cities that lay close to the sea, for instance, tended to be the cities that had been affected by more modern times. The towns and villages that lay up in the headwater hills, on the other hand, were ancient, or had lain untouched and unspoiled for centuries.

Upstream was ancient; downstream was more modern. Downstream was today; upstream was yesterday.”

Cultivated Liberty

An ancient wealth of inaction

The term *laissez-faire* is a French translation of a Chinese formula, but it can easily seem as if the English-speaking world has become, by default, its uncontested proprietor. *Laissez-faire* has become so firmly linked with anglophone capitalism and the ideal of the anorexic ‘nightwatchman’ state at the heart of classical liberalism that France has shown positive vigor in abandoning all claims to linguistic paternity, as in the analogous case of entrepreneur. When the Heritage Foundation and Fraser Institute release their joint worldwide survey of economic liberty, the inevitable presence of Hong Kong and Singapore in the top slots is considered almost a formality, typically ascribed to the common legacy of British Imperialism, rather than to shared Chinese ethnicity (a judgement reinforced by the presence of Ireland, Australia, the United States, New Zealand and Canada in the five follow-up slots in 2008).

An extraordinarily stimulating essay by historian Christian Gerlach entitled ‘Wu-wei in Europe: A Study of Eurasian Economic Thought’ re-opens this seemingly settled topic. It turns out that the story of *laissez-faire* is far more meandering and disconcerting than its contemporary, rigidly cemented associations might suggest.

Laissez-faire directly translates *wu-wei*, the creative inactivity that served Laozi’s supreme practical maxim, as recorded in the *Dao De Jing*. It is less well known that long before the term’s migration into Europe, it already served as “an ancient Chinese concept of political economy” within a rustic Confucian setting, where the light hand of government was understood as evidence of conformity with the way of nature. The *wu-wei* political philosophy recommends establishing social order in accordance with natural tendencies, minimizing the requirement for subsequent interventions and adjustments. Gerlach draws upon a variety of authorities to demonstrate that such *wu-wei*

erzhi ('order through inaction' or 'spontaneous order') was the dominant principle of Chinese political economy during most of its post-Warring-States (475-221 BC) history. This is very far indeed from the model of 'Oriental Despotism' invoked by Western observers from Karl Marx to Karl Wittfogel and beyond. It is equally far from industrial capitalism and Manchester Liberalism's 'dark satanic mills'.

Even after arriving in Europe and becoming laissez-faire, wu-wei erzhi remained an Arcadian ideal, rooted in an agricultural understanding of prosperity as something that flourishes like vegetation when suitable conditions prevail. While considerable uncertainty attends the birth of laissez-faire as a technical expression, it was definitely raised in the school of physiocracy, under the guidance of the French economic thinker (and Sinophile) François Quesnay, known in his own day as the 'Confucius of Europe'. Quesnay was so thoroughly versed in its Chinese context he tried to pass off his own writings as translated Chinese texts.

Laissez-faire ideas based on restrained governance and commercial freedom are far older, more (Continental) European, more Chinese (and especially more Confucian), more venerably cosmopolitan and more agricultural than is generally realized. Adam Smith was a student of such thinking, rather than its original ancestor, drawing upon a prior fully-formulated minimal government approach to economic life that had already been at least partially institutionalized during China's Tang Dynasty (618-907) and proved hugely influential in early enlightenment Europe.

Among the many insights Gerlach provides, one broad conclusion is inescapable: Economic freedom was not an alien idea delivered to the East by gunboat. There is clearly a deep history of Chinese commercial culture that deserves far more open-minded attention than it has yet received.

Christian Gerlach's essay is accessible online at
www.lse.ac.uk/collections/economicHistory/GEHN/GEHNPdf/WorkingPaper12CG.pdf

Stories That End in Tiers

Pagodas are on the up and up

High-rise construction is inextricably associated with the modernization of urban skylines. The skyscraper has been the principal symbol of architectural modernity, lifted cleanly away from the past by a reliance on technical innovations, from steel-frame engineering and elevators to advanced design tools. Due to their cost, complexity and dramatic visibility, skyscrapers make a highly conspicuous statement about the economic vitality and technical prowess of the cities that host them. This message has proven irresistible to a winning coalition of powerful enthusiasts.

The claim that the modern city is a highrise city seems relatively uncontroversial, but it is often attended by a secondary judgment that is far more questionable. Acknowledgment of the international highrise metropolis is regularly packaged together with accusations that denounce the skyscraper for producing a cityscape that is stereotyped, homogeneous, perhaps even essentially Westernized, crushing local characteristics beneath a tedious gigantism with roots in a distinctly European tradition of architecture and urban planning.

It is worth noting, therefore, that at least two solidly established traditions of pre-modern high-rise construction continue to exert significant influence on developments today. The younger of these was the (European) Gothic, originating in 12th century France, which anticipated the principle of frame construction in important respects. Gothic cathedrals were draped about a stone skeleton of flying buttresses and ribbed vaults, enabling them to rise to unprecedented heights, with massive load-bearing walls attenuated to luminous stained-glass surfaces.

The elder tradition was built in Asia, also on religious foundations. It was born in India, in the 3rd century BC, with the stupa – a tiered tower designed to house religious relics. As Buddhism spread throughout South and East Asia, the sacred towers followed, into Nepal, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, as well as to China and onwards to Japan. In China the stupa-form, or pagoda, was adopted with special fervor by Daoist as well as Buddhist temple builders, undergoing numerous experimental innovations in design and materials, while preserving its essential characteristics as a single tower with emphatic vertical segmentation.

Creative explosions of Chinese pagoda architecture accompanied the wider rhythm of cultural efflorescence, with productive intensity climaxing during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and again during the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties (960-1127, 1127-1279). Wooden pagodas were built in China no later than the 3rd century AD, stone pagodas followed by the fourth century, and modern pagodas of traditional specifications continue to be built today.

The idea of the pagoda has proven to be even more influential than a narrow definition suggests, since any survey of the modern world's tallest buildings shows it has been enormously successful at translating itself into secular skyscraper construction. Taipei 101, the Petronas Twin Towers and the Jin Mao Tower are only the most obvious examples of secular super-pagodas that have taken their place among the pinacles of the hypermodern city, ensuring that the global race to the clouds expresses a plurality of geographical and cultural inspiration.

For those of an adamantly parochial persuasion, however, there is little comfort to be derived from this story. The history of the pagoda is, if anything, even more cosmopolitan than the lineages familiar to students of Western architectural history, spanning cultures, religions and epochs, while subordinating local variation to the ever-dilating cosmos of its contagious model. America's Indianapolis Motor Speedway (host to the Indy 500) has sported a 13-story pagoda structure since 1913. The idea of the pagoda has entered into a

fruitful alliance with the modern city because both belong to the world.